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Water of Life: Our Common Future

Marcos Terena *

Notes for a panel presentation
at the conference on

“Allocating and Managing Water for a Sustainable Future:
Lessons from Around the World”

Natural Resources Law Center
University of Colorado School of Law

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1. Introduction

We have started a new century as indigenous people who look into the future, grounded in the ways of our ancestors. When the first white men arrived in our lands, they talked and defeated us with the promise of a New World; a better world than the one that we had. But, to this end, it was necessary to bury our culture, our customs and traditions. They just forgot to tell us that “to be this new type of people,” it was necessary to abandon our main reason in life: the land and the natural environment.

Thus, during a long 500 years, we saw the world being built around us, in which material values were always more important than human and environmental values. We never understood and never became what they would like. Then we discovered that we were not the original donors anymore, just obstacles, considered as unproductive savages and beings without soul. Hundreds, thousands of brothers disappeared. They were killed in order to promote the promised “new civilization.”

Now that we can comprehend language and new customs better than in the past, we learned to observe the biggest mistakes of the white man. First with respect to our original territory—our “land without owner”—it got an owner, i.e., a proprietor who could have more than one area and could be the owner of an entire region, alone, without the collective spirit, shared, to divide the benefits of Mother Earth. As the landmark of a new civilization, it was necessary to kill the land with garbage, to kill the forest and the natural resources, because most important in this relationship was to take all the material goods from the land such as gold, silver, oil, uranium, timber, etc.

2. The Development Contradiction

When we look at the development codes of the white man, the same principles of individuality and one-sidedness is adopted. Some of these principals are the material enrichment of some at the cost of many, generating the poverty of people, family and entire populations under the order of economic and consumption power, known as the market laws. In this model, most important is to save the currency of the powerful, even if it means high levels of starvation, misery or dependency of people or sovereign countries under the economic or bellicose power. For this, the white man created instruments such as the multilateral banks, the international funds and the forum of commerce and international trade.

In these places, not all countries and people who are part of white man society are participating either. Shall we believe that indigenous people who have different forms of economic, social and environmental life, different from the ones established inside of this Society, will participate?

We, the indigenous people, have been participating in many forums of ecological awareness, even when they considered us as the primitive part or the victim of the process. We are aware of our importance and our responsibility in building a fairer society, more brotherly in order to get the best for our next generations. The modern world goes on with its contradictions such as seeking peace through warfare (an imposed peace), without any respect to the individual and collective sense, making people sick in the name of science and life. We cannot accept a science that intends to modify the human nature, challenging the Great Creator, in order to clone humans, at enormous costs, while thousands of people do not have food to eat. A society based on all these crazy and predatory ideas cannot have dreams for the future.

In Brazil, South America, because of the indigenous people's wisdom, innumerable sources of natural resources, such as biodiversity and water, are references of life and provide sustainable balance to indigenous families. These natural resources exert healthful collateral effects to the ones who live in large urban areas, who are practicing, producing or receiving pollution from the architecture, machines, garbage and sewage.

The Great Creator gave the wisdom to natives, the power to sustainably manage natural resources, and because of this, we have status to assert our disposition in working for a modernity of "life" and not of "death." So, this world needs to learn and to hear the indigenous voice, because it is the earth's voice. Also, because of this, we had the opportunity of learning the white man codes and of perceiving economic value. These models consider the indigenous land, forests, water and biodiversity simply as material source of wealth, which does not have owner, because in reality, the owners are ourselves, native man and non-native: the humanity.

Now, we call on everybody: the drinking water is asking for help, here in a country which has 10 percent of the drinking water on the planet (including in Amazon, Pantanal, and Cerrado), natural habitats and our people's tradition, from our ancestral and Creator. Because of this, we cannot understand the entrepreneur's logic from the transnational companies.

3. Water is Life

There was a day in which the natives looked to water as a way to cure their hunger and thirst, but also as an older sister who teaches how to walk and to coexist, including spiritually, because for us, water is life.

So much as in relation to the land, the colonizer looked at the aquatic wealth as an opportunity for making money. Starting from the huge engineering constructions of hydropower to the point that the modern world currently lives: to pay for the water to cure your thirst, to use and to sale.

We, the native people, have learned with our ancestors, to value the water. We could say that if today the white man may miss bath, with soap and shampoo, it is so because of our way of coexisting with water and the pleasure of cleaning our body, but also as a healthy way of purifying our pores and be health in our day-to-day. In our communities, in the forest, our shamans taught us to respect different water aspects: its sources, headboard of the river, understanding the life cycle that water promotes, such as the animals that live in the river i.e. fish, reproducing and feeding ourselves. The colonizer man likes to fish as a sport, predatory, commercial, disrespecting the water codes of life.

When a researcher arrived in a village, he had the intention to discover, to learn everything about indigenous life. Then, one day, he had the opportunity to hike and to visit another village. He had an old warrior as his companion. At halfway, they stooped to rest and to eat something. Close to where they were, there was a spring from which they cured their thirst and rested under the trees. Then, the young researcher discovered an animal that was drinking from the same spring, and he prepared himself to kill it, when he was stopped by the warrior who said: Are you hungry? If you kill the animal, could you carry it to the village? You need to learn that the animals also have the right to drink from the same spring that we drink. This makes them vulnerable to be killed, but we should do it only if it helps or it is good for our life, and not just for pleasure of conquering an animal's life.

This example clearly shows once again, facing the modernity routine, that the civilization walks for an uncertain future and it is necessary to look for a route of balance between values and forms of life, having the natural environment as part of a whole.

Colonization started 500 years ago, globalization is now starting, but the domination principles are the same. Because of this, we as natives are trying to walk through the steps of the new civilization, learning and understanding how to walk along with the progress and development system, which once defeated us, as a worthy way of life. But now, we are more concerned because we know that these mistakes can affect and destroy life forms, including the humanity. We have been observing that the immediate material profit ambitions are not compatible with environmental and human values, because they are not a priority or they are not considered as an important aspect or factor.

For this modernity, our people have been paying a high price, including their lives and those of our ancestors, our culture, our economy and our society. Programs and projects financed by the multilateral banks seeking new energy sources, new transport systems and profit, occur in places where indigenous people used to live happily with their wives, elders and children.

Experts planned roads, hydropower, and waterways, in order to assure that it would profit, without considering the material, structural, indigenous or environmental damages. Thus, in Amazônia, once there was a tribe called Parakanã, which was moved to another region because where they used to live and always lived, was to be built an enormous Amazonian hydropower facility to produce energy for houses and industries in the city and profit for entrepreneurs. The Parakanãs cried a lot, but they left that land for another one that they did not know. The hydropower was built, with an enormous lake of sick waters, because the animals, trees, medicinal plants and timber were not respected and they were covered by water. A project without the Environmental Impact Study...

Something very similar happened in the land of the native brothers Waimiri-Artroari, close to the Venezuelan boarder. According to studies and technical criteria, their land was considered an appropriate place to build a new hydropower facility, with capacity to produce energy for the Amazon and the lands in the south. But when the work was done, with environmental and human aggressions, the facility could not produce energy. There was not enough water to make the project economically viable.

These are mistakes with enormous impact on the natural environment and the original indigenous people in the region; mistakes that kill cultures, traditions, spirituality and the self-esteem of people. They consider an ecosystem as a product and its destruction as easily justifiable. Does this mean that it is not necessary to be responsible for the mistakes that were done and why? Why with a good reason is it allowed to destroy the environment?

According to our responsibilities and worries, it is necessary that, in the era of technology and computers, all humanity should not follow the way that politicians and bureaucracy justify the death over life, that change environmental and human values in order to make profit. It is necessary to share responsibilities, because from the native's perspectives, we continue to live our way of life, a good life, and because of this, we believe that the non-indigenous humanity needs to be committed and be responsible as part of Mother Earth.

4. The Alliance to Our Lives and to Water

We, the indigenous people, have had many experiences with the colonization system, usually as victims and the latest in the social and economic classes. But we want to assert our commitment with the land and all life systems of nature, as part of an alliance process to protect water, as a source that will end if we do not protect its ecosystems.

The Universities need to find a new conscious with regard to the natural environment with regard to their students as well as the reference to the actual modern society.

The multilateral banks cannot continue to pay loans to destroy nature, but must have funds for sustainable projects, including natives and traditional communities, as a way to change their behavior and recognize their past mistakes. We, native people, have the commitment to contribute to this process.

The government and the parliamentarians need to create clear and true forms of water protection, at its sources and roots, which do not accept mechanisms of partial protection or mitigation, but assure life to all generations, including the ones that have not been born yet. The government commitment is necessary to avoid garbage to be thrown in the water and in the Universe, because the Universe is the people's household and the habitat of the Great Creator.

We cannot accept that the white men and their machines transform the river into a market currency with fast profit. So, human beings with ecological conscious must create mechanisms to stop predator humans from continuing with this craziness.

Water is a common asset. We cannot accept that drinking corporations become the owners of water sources, because these small sources are the origins of water, lakes and rivers. All of them are wealthy, but wealth that you cannot buy, because they are wealthy for humans and animals life.

In order to explain, we ask a new question: if an industry pollutes the water, its responsibility is just based on monetary terms. Which means that if it pays a fine, does it allow them to continue to kill the water and nature?

When we look into the future, we perceive the urgent need of having a new alliance between white man and natives, to preserve and to cultivate the water benefits. Since a long time ago we have been trying to preserve the water values, but we were never understood.

Now, we, indigenous people, challenge the modern world: are your machines capable of substituting the water taste? We do not believe that they can, but we believe that they could help to protect our common asset and our future well-being.

Now, the modern man who has the necessity as a human being and animal to ingest clean water in his sick body, as well as any alive being, native, trees and animals, should make a commitment to use their technology for the well-being of humanity. If we work together for water preservation, certainly we will not have in the future rivers such as Sena in France, Potomac in Washington, Mississippi, or lakes such in Geneva with water, but water with no life.